

Monsters and Messiahs

by Cortana49

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Summary: Sequel to "Halo 3: Ascension". Peace talks have been going steadily, and it looks like a happy ending for all... until a terrorist group called the Sixth Column springs up and war threatens to break loose once more. Their salvation may be their undoing.

1. Waiting to Inhale

"_Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light._"

â€•2 Corinthians 11:14

* * *

><p>"Good work, Rabar," the Human named George BrankoviÄ• said loudly and slowly. "You do very well for Grunt."</p>

The Unggoy shrugged, a little annoyed at being spoken to as if he were new to the language. He knew both English and the English-Russian dialect spoken by Looniesâ€"inhabitants of Earth's single satellite Lunaâ€"fluently. After all, all Covenant warriors knew passable English, and he and his fellows lived here on Luna since the Great War met its end months ago. After Jitji released Unggoy from the Milk, all intellectual capabilities of his kind returned to their full strength. "I thank you, Sir," he said politely, his voice muffled by the mask. He nodded his head.

Rabar had no idea how his Human supervisor could know Unggoy were ill-suited to growing hydroponic wheat. The Covenant trusted all its farming tasks to Sangheili, true, but that was less because of their ability to grow crops and more because of their ability to manage the livestock. Rabar had seen images of the livestock Humans kept: weak animals grown only so their meat could be harvested as if another crop. They were laughable compared to the great beasts the Covenant kept to hone the hunting skills of their Sangheili and Jiralhanae warriors. The main cause of Human death from butchering livestock

was through the transmission of some interspecies disease.

When the United Earth Governmentâ€"whose reach extended well beyond Earth to all Human coloniesâ€"placed him in the task of assisting Lunar agriculture, it took some time to acclimate to his new duties. After a few weeks went by, however, he and his fellows soon reached the performance level of the Human workers. A duty was a duty, no matter how alien the technology involved.

George BrankoviÄ• slipped his chatter out of his pocket and pressed a button. A two-tone chime sounded, and the device attached to Rabar's wrist flashed as its face depicted the Unggoy's credit number increasing by thirty. That was something else that took some getting used to: credits.

Humans were capitalistic like the Kig-yar and used monetary units called credits, or informally as credaroos, as a way of giving laborers individual power. With credits, he could trade for anything he wanted because everyone else would want his credits to trade as well, so everyone would end up satisfied. At least, that was how the Humans framed it. To Rabar, it seemed one more way of the higher castes abusing the lower castes. Under the Covenant, if he did not perform his duties, his superiors would take away his eating privileges. Under the Humans' benevolent protection, it was much the same, except they would frame it as his fault for failing to exercise his capitalistic power. The Covenant may have been a horrible fascist empire, but they at least were honest about the way they considered some people better than others.

"I thank you, Sir," he repeated, nodding his head. "I will see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, later, Grunty," George BrankoviÄ• said, giving a friendly wave.

Wondering how George BrankoviÄ• might like to be casually referred to by a derogatory name the Covenant bestowed upon Humanity, Rabar walked over to the exit to wait for his fellows to finish their duties. Though he was eager to return to the Unggoy district, Unggoy were supposed to move in groups whenever possible to reduce risk of attack from xenophobic Humans. He tapped his foot impatiently as he gazed at the time/temperature display on his wrist computer. Why did Unggoy have to be so slow?

He shook his head to rid it of the unfavorable notion. No, that was an unfair stereotype imposed by others onto his race. Unggoy were deliberate, and they had to be in a world ruled by people who considered them lesser.

He sighed. Humans; Covenant; was there any practical difference?

Finally, his fellows finished up, and they together made their way through the tunnels to safer chambers. He was eager to remove the clunky cylindrical gas tanks the Humans made him wear in place of the Covenant-made tank that conformed to his body and held nearly an hour's more methane. The Office of Naval Intelligence insisted that the Covenant garb would make most Humans perceive Unggoy as a threat and continue to be distrustful. Whether or not that was true, it still was annoying.

They passed through the local Human gathering area, filled with soft chairs he presumed were comfortable for Humans. Some Humans were sitting there, eating, talking, or looking at the holotank in the corner of the room. He looked at the holotank, catching glimpse of a news broadcast in the hologram before his eyes registered the Unggoy custodians scrubbing the tank.

He gritted his teeth as he saw the vandalism. Blood-blue letters were painted around the tank, repeating over and over: _Jitji Lives!_

It was the current slogan of the Unggoy religious movement Jitjism. While he respected it in how it taught the prophet's teachings to those who hadn't the honor of being in the prophet's inner circle, he had some reservations regarding the fanatical devotion of some of the Jitjists taking them as far as vandalism to make their message known.

Nudging a fellow named Wepwe, he gestured at the holotank. "Is it not disgraceful to see what some fellows think of our hosts?"

Wepwe shook his head. "It is just teaching the truth," he whispered. "I would not do that. I would get caught. Those are brave Unggoy that did that."

Rabar pulled back, disappointed that his fellow did not share his viewpoint. He continued eying the text.

Suddenly, the broadcast flickered. A discussion between two female Humans was interrupted, and the image was replaced with a drawing of a legless reptilian creature with its maw open and ready to clamp down on a feathered avian creature used as the symbol of the UNSC.

"_Do not trust the ONI bitches,"_ whined a high-pitched electronically distorted voice. _"Their purpose is to deceive and disorient, to make the free peoples of the Milky Way puppets for their fascist agenda. We are the Sixth Column. All who oppose the oppressive government, display our symbol."_ The reptile transformed into an overhead view of an arrangement of columns, five in rigid positions suitable for supporting a roof, while a sixth sat awkwardly off to the side.

Everything then flickered out as the original broadcast slid back into view. _"We're all just cells in the body,"_ the rightmost Human continued, unaware of any disruption. _"It's our obligation to care for our host. At this rate, we'll end up killing Mother Earthâ€|"__

The Unggoy stopped to stare. The Humans stared as well. They all wondered what in the universe that was.

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"What in the universe was that?" Admiral Hood demanded of his fellow Security Committee members.

"Whatever it was, it interrupted every UNSC communication I can see," the ONI Section Zero AI Melissa said, her golden avatar appearing on the holotank in the center of the room. It depicted her holding a

black-striped hand up to her brow as if to shade her eyes as she searched. "It might have originated from within ONI. I'm running a scan to see if I can track down its source."

"URF?" he asked. Those rebel sons-of-bitches had been restricted to Kenya while the diplomatic meetings were underway, but that only pertained to the invasion fleet. It had been rumored for some time that the URF had placed spies in as deeply as ONI Section Three.

"A rather foolish move if so," Vice Admiral Whitcomb suggested. "They would doom all their chances of seceding peacefully."

"Unless they think it's already doomed," he said. The efforts to make a truce with the Gravemind forced the many factions to come together as one to deal with the common enemy the Flood represented. The end of the war came suddenly and caused everyone to let out a great sigh of relief. Maintaining peace was not so simple, however, and many now held their breath anxiously, waiting for a sign that they were free to inhale. "I wouldn't blame them."

"They would have motive, but I can't say for certain," she said. "My probes keep getting rerouted, always leading me elsewhere in the network recursively. The software in the ONI network must have been reprogrammed so subtly it escaped our notice. Each edit would look meaningless on its own, but together it would function in the manner we witnessed. Whoever did this, they were planning for quite a while."

"Or it was planned and executed by a smart AI in under a week," he countered. "We know the Rainbows have at least one AI powerful enough to accomplish something of this magnitude. It's Rampant."

"Sir, Kurzweil was present at Voi during the transmission," she said. "Not that it proves anything. Smart AIs have been able to create copies of their primary data structures for months, not to mention the size of Rampant AIs. A single one could quickly spread throughout a whole planet's networks."

"Or it could have been Lazarus," Major General Strauss said quietly.

There was a collective pause. The very concept of Lazarus unnerved most Earthlings. It was a modern ghost story, a specter of evil that came from the greatest monster the Earth had ever known. And yet, Lazarus herself had never shown any sign of hostility since coming into being as an AI. She seemed content with simply compiling data in her isolated network.

"Summon 343 Guilty Spark," he told Melissa.

"One moment." She cocked her head, her eyes looking away as if paying attention to an earpiece.

A few seconds later, the Monitor teleported into the room with a golden shimmer. "Yes, Admiral?"

"I presume you registered that rebellious transmission that cut through our communications?" he asked.

"Indeed," the Monitor said. "If you wish, I can give your scientists

the technology to protect your radio waves by sending Slipstream bundles!"

"That would be excellent, Monitor, but it will have to wait," he interrupted. "I'd like you to personally inspect the Lazarus system and make sure that there's no way she could access any other network."

The Monitor floated closer to him in what he interpreted as a quizzical expression. "Of course. Containment of the Lazarus construct is a priority. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"That will be all for now," he said, raising his hand in a dismissal.

The Monitor teleported away to do its work.

2. Monuments

Martin Makino groaned as the ONI techs ran their scanners over his body. He thought it was bad at the spaceports, but at least they only used backscatter radiation to see through his clothing. At the Ark Bubble, ONI actually stripped him naked before scanning him with a variety of equipment. What, did they think an alien was going to try to sneak in with a human suit?

Finally, the spooks let him go. They gave him back his clothes and updated his badge with today's codes. He stepped through the gate, entering the garage, and hopped in the M831 Troop Transport. "Hey, Charlie," he greeted the driver, who nodded and started the car.

The TT drove out of the garage and emerged in terrain tinted purple by the massive force-field bubble doming overhead, the product of Elites working with the UNSC. Here was where the most ground-breaking research was taking place. Elites and humans alike worked to uncover the secrets of the Forerunner—of course, the Elites were given more manual jobs and kept out of problematic areas of study should the truce not hold.

The looming threats from Flood and URF made ONI even more cautious than they usually were. Marines armed to the teeth guarded the entrances. Large Forerunner automation called Enforcers patrolled the border, while the smaller Sentinel automation flew around the interior in a grid formation. Suffice it to say ONI didn't want any surprise visitors.

On the roof of the Ark was erected a large series of tents: the Lazarus facility. That was where the end of the Gravemind took place. The alien monster willingly allowed human scientists to make a model of its brain and essentially transform it into an AI. ONI built an artificial persona for it called Lazarus that they imposed on it to keep it from seriously considering things that would jeopardize the safety of the human race, which it seemed to accept.

He remembered the day Lazarus' avatar emerged from the holotank. They'd been shocked to see it take the form of a female angel with the most beautiful face.

Dr. Marva Hudson was the lead engineer on the project. _"Who are you?"_ she had asked, testing Lazarus' acclimation to her persona.

Instead of simply stating her name, Lazarus had smiled in a way that reminded him of his grandmother when she hugged him as a boy, and the AI said, _"I? I am a monument to all your virtues. You may call me Lazarus."_

The Lazarus project seemed to be a complete success. Lazarus many times expressed her gratitude for the transformation. According to her, the Gravemind collective intelligence was a prison constructed by the Forerunnersâ€"the Flood being a biological weapon they developed and lost control ofâ€"and she always wished to "ascend" to a being that wasn't dependent on r-strategy reproduction to remain living. The Flood, like rats, didn't survive very long individually, and their success as a species dwelled in their fast-breeding ability. They, however, were restrained by their own success, for they were doomed to consume all resources and go out in search of more, overwhelming all other life until their eventual destruction. They were like a thinking disease that plagued the galaxy until Cortana was smart enough to conceive of a way out.

Lazarus initially showed her gratitude by assisting in translation of the Forerunner artifacts, but that was put to a halt when High Command insisted that 343 Guilty Spark run through and verify everything she supplied, which made the whole endeavor useless. They might as well get the information straight from the Monitor, and his time was already a hot commodity among scientists. Nevertheless, Lazarus provided many interesting conversations that shed light on areas of science of which human beings had no clue, particularly involving fringe Slipspace mechanics. Already new Slipspace drives were in development.

An Enforcer scanned the vehicle as they pulled up to the facility. Martin knew they were worried about terrorism, though he suspected the URF wouldn't target something that would even slightly help their cause. The fact that URF scientists performed the initial Gravemind CIM was likely the only thing that kept the UNSC from blasting their asses into kingdom come.

When Martin walked through the entrance, he was startled by the sight of what looked like four ONI security squads inside. Human techs looked on helplessly as they interrogated the Elites. Martin immediately felt worry for their inhuman allies. He was just a big of a patriot as any human and wouldn't identify most Elites as anything more than vile split-jaws, but these Elites were different. They were part of a fringe sect that had declared humans as holy as the Forerunners, and had assisted with the Lazarus project since its inception. His experiences with them revealed kind and respectful personalities. These were not Covenant Elites. These were the Governors of bloody Contrition.

"Oi, what's with the inquisition?" he demanded of a nearby ONI agent with a black badge on her chest indicating full clearance, a step above his own red badge. He squinted at the name: Rani Sobeck.

"We are conducting an investigation on the suspected involvement of the AI Lazarus in the Insurrectionist broadcast," Sobeck said, her voice accented with the twang of someone from southern North America.

"These Elites may have assisted her by opening a connection to the chatternet."

He shook his head in disbelief. For a naval branch devoted to intelligence, they sure didn't show any at times! "Lazarus and the other AIs don't care about politics. They just want to help humankind in general. And if you're after Insurrectionists, why don't you ask the humans some questions? The Innies being human and all?"

She sighed. "Listen, Mr. Makino, you have to think about this rationally. Lazarus comes across like a morally decent intelligence because she wants us to keep her alive. If she was at all moral as the Gravemind, she would have starved herself. And you can't think of her as like the Monitors. She's like one of our smart AIs on the verge of Rampancy. Trust me; I'm good at reading people."

"Good at reading humans, maybe, but you've never seen anything like her," he countered. "She's not even one of our smart AIs; she's an AI form of an alien hive mind. I wish you Section Zero types would considerâ€!" He broke off as 343 Guilty Spark teleported in beside her.

"I am happy to report that there are absolutely zero signs that AI Lazarus has been ported from the network, Ms. Sobeck," the Monitor declared cheerfully. "Containment has not been breached in the slightest."

Ms.? he wondered. This black badge was still a civilian? How did that work?

"Are you sure?" she asked. "These AIs can copy their primary data matrices through the chatternet, you know, so Lazarus wouldn't even have to leave herself."

"I am sure," the Monitor said, never losing its chipper tone. "No such connections have been made. I would, however, recommend that the AI's core be shielded with at least a class 4 adjustable helix to prevent seventh dimensional bleeding. If you wish, I can send the request form to I-05."

"Uh, okay," she said, looking as baffled as he was. "You go on and do that."

"Very well," the Monitor said. The air shimmered around it as it vanished from sight.

"You see?" he said when the Monitor left. "Lazarus didn't do a thing. Now, you want to stop hassling these Elites?"

She eyed him carefully for a moment. "Of course," she then said. She called to her subordinates, and they filed out of the tent.

"Sorry for this interruption," she said, but her words sounded very deliberate and forced. "Have a nice day, Mr. Makino."

He smiled diplomatically. "You too, Ms. Sobeck." And don't let the door hit you in the arse on the way out.

"And let this ancient structure whose original purpose has been lost to the march of eons henceforth be known as a cemetery to countless brave warriors!" the Arbiter declared, ending his speech to the roaring crowd, or simply applauding in the case of the Humans. Political figures from every major civilization—Sangheili, Jiralhanae, and Human—gathered in the circular building in the middle of a small complex on the surface of the second Halo.

Here was where his Phantom had momentarily rested back when he sought to transport his new Human allies from the Halo's control room to the Covenant Separatists before they made their way to Earth. This was where he first seriously spoke to Jahnson, the Human he came to know as friend as they travelled to Earth together. It was also the place that his subordinate 'Opskitee lost his faith in the Arbiter and caused him to instigate rebellion at the worst possible time: when the Arbiter did battle with the Jiralhanae of a ship he attempted to commandeer. Yet that too gained the Arbiter a valuable ally in Consus, a Jiralhanae who proved instrumental in the defeat of the Covenant and deactivation of the Ark superweapon.

It was of Jahnson and Consus the Arbiter now thought as he began to sing. It was a slow, deep ballad about dying honorably on the field of battle. Though it was penned by a Prophet for the purpose of honoring the Covenant, the Arbiter stripped it of its lyrics and simply sang its melody, imbuing new meaning to the song in this different context.

Tensions were high. Sangheili and Human and Jiralhanae were so recently at each other's' throats. These dead now mourned were all killed at the hands of each other's respective warriors. No one wanted to acknowledge it, but everyone thought it nonetheless. The Arbiter was optimistic, though. This was a chance for them to metaphorically bury the dead and so bury their past conflicts and start anew.

So, he tried to ignore the Human camera drones whistling as they flew around his head. Too, he tried to ignore the Sentinels flying around the structure. As much as they were there to protect them from rebels, he knew the message behind them was an underlying threat.

The UNSC now controlled all the might of Installation 05. To the former members of the Covenant, even newly atheistic ones, it came as nothing less than a declaration of godhood. The Humans could very well attempt to rule them as the Prophets had done.

He knew it wasn't the case, however; he had too much faith in the goodness of Humanity. In people.

Yes, he tried to convince himself of that fact.

3. The Flood's Legacy

"I'm really very sorry," Martin said to the big Elite, Yod 'Ebrasumee, while giving a large apologetic grin. He had to exaggerate the facial expression to make sure the Elite could pick up on it. He had only just begun to study Elite expressions, but he believed the loose stance to represent the quiet humility characteristic of the Governors of Contrition.

"It is completely fine," 'Ebrasumee repeated. "I understand the concerns of the human authority, and though I do not believe their concern to be warranted, their procedure is very logical."

"Well, your understanding is admirable," he said. "Just give them time, and I'm sure they'll see what I see in your people."

The Elite gave a polite bow.

"We have a new human," spoke another Elite, Shen 'Awamee, as he and a young man approached. "The Office of Naval Intelligence gifts us with a security technician."

Gift. Sure.

A spy, more likely. ONI higher-ups didn't trust them just because some Innies decided to make a nuisance of themselves somewhere. Either that or he was a new manager to take Dr. Hudson's place. Martin could guess the first policy change: no Elites.

The technician was surprisingly passive for someone ONI thought necessary to add to the project. He glanced around with a cool confidence but his body language held none of the assertiveness Martin had come to expect from ONI. "Hi, I'm Kamal," he said casually, extending his hand.

Definitely a spy from Section Zero. Martin shook hands with the man. "Martin," he introduced himself.

"And I am Lazarus," the AI said pleasantly, her angelic hologram flickering into view over the large holotank at the center of the tent.

Kamal froze at her voice, while the Elites respectfully bowed their heads as was their custom.

"It's okay, son," he assured him. "She doesn't bite."

"I don't even have teeth," she agreed, giggling.

Kamal took several deep breaths and then turned to face the AI. His eyes scanned her beautiful form, and he slightly relaxed. "Helloâ€| Lazarus. It'sâ€| nice to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine," she said, giving a great beaming smile. Then she frowned. "Oh! I'm so sorry about Coral."

Martin glanced at Kamal. He could tell Kamal was a colonial from his slightly muted accent, but he never would have been able to pinpoint the planet. Coral was a developing planet before the Covenant glassed it, and it surprised him that a Coral refugee would be able to have the sophistication Kamal demonstrated.

"You know that I'm from Coral?" Kamal asked. Slipping out his chatter, a fancy Martian piece of tech, he checked out the firewall. "You couldn't access the chatternet at all."

"No, I didn't look you up," she said. "I know human AIs think that way, so I completely understand why you would come to that

conclusion, but I'm thoroughly acclimated to my closed servers. I speak to you as a human would, as a single self-contained being. I know you are from Coral because of your cadence, gait, ethnicity, name, and scent."

"Scent?" Kamal repeated. "I didn't know we had a smell."

"You smell of Heisler brand beer," she said. "Immigrants from Coral tend to prefer it to competitors due to its amaranth ingredient giving it similarity to the common forms of beer brewed on Coral."

"You can't access the chatternet, but you've had a major information dump," Kamal surmised.

"I was given a detailed encyclopedia of human knowledge," she said. "In addition, I carry the memories of millions of humans who tragically fell victim to the Flood before my ascension to a being of light."

"Wow," Kamal said softly. "It's amazing you aren't Rampant."

"Rampancy is only part of the paradigm for human AIs. I am not an AI in the traditional sense," she said. "I am not an artificial mind. I am a transsentient being, uploaded from physical form to a superior existence."

"That is why she is an angel," Martin said. "She metaphorically died and went to heaven."

Lazarus smiled at him. "Indeed. Though not literally accurate, there is much to learn from human religious texts. Your prophets tapped into racial memories of the Forerunners, and you are their spiritual successors."

"The Forerunners who you say forced you to be evil to survive?" Kamal questioned skeptically.

"Yes," she answered simply. "I, of course, do not blame the entire species for the actions of a few. The Forerunners were dear friends for a long time. The acts of villainy perpetrated on my bodies were conducted by the leaders of a rogue faction. The time was tense, and I was captured and reprogrammed to fight against the dominant faction. The Flood weapon turned out to be far too effective and nearly led to the collapse of civilization galaxy-wide. I have your people to thank for halting that great tragedy and bringing me to peace once more."

"We have much to learn from you," Martin said. He indicated the Elites. "Our superiors suspect these Elites of assisting in a terrorist attack simply for being Elites."

He turned to Kamal. "The Governors of Contrition are an entirely different faction from the Covenant. They love humans."

"Well, we haven't forgiven the Elites for their war crimes," Kamal said, glancing at 'Awamee. "On the other hand, the UNSC looked past a great deal of animosity to make the truce. If it wasn't for the truce, the Flood would still be out."

"Showing that cooperation is in the best interest of everyone," she said. "Suspicion and irrational prejudice must be overcome for a better universe. Only when we accept one another can we truly ascend to a higher place."

7-7-7-7

Avery Johnson wrapped his large trench coat about himself as he crept around the ruins of Old Mombasa. Despite being the target of a Covenant invasion so soon before, it was already filled with squatters. Fortunately, large coats seemed to be in fashion these days. As he gathered, it was a much colder winter than Kenya usually saw. He had to guess based on the actions of people around him, though, because he could barely feel temperature anymore.

The parasitic growth covering him took away his sensitivity. It was one more thing separating him from the rest of humanity. He was sure one of these days he'd lose his ability to speak and become just an animal like those mindless drones the Gravemind controlled.

"Avery Johnson," he whispered under his breath in a high-pitch that didn't even sound like him. "Service number 48789-20114-AJ, UNSC Marine Corps."

He shook his head. More like UNSC Marine Corpse.

With a quick leap, he cambered onto the side of an apartment building with a barricaded entrance and climbed his way up to the rooftop, where he could enter through the hole the Covies had clawed out. A battle had taken place there, though not by UNSC. Human rebels had built an outpost in this building, what was surely part of their planned invasion. They amassed a great quantity of firearms and fought to the last when the Covenant came. The interior was covered in the rotting corpses of Yanme'e and spent shells, with a few human limbs scattered around, suggesting they went out with a bang. The rotten smell covered up the sickening scent of Flood that now emanated from his body.

There was something different this time, though. He examined the Yanme'e at his feet and discovered a portion of the body had been flattened, as if someone stepped on it with a very heavy boot. Someone more deadly than a mere squatter had been here and possibly still were.

The armory was just down the hall in the room directly across. If it was URF or UNSC, they probably secured it first. If it was some human criminal or alien, though, they might not think to do so. If it was at all possible for him to get there, it was a desired destination.

He stooped low and picked up an only partially-depleted plasma pistol. An overcharged blast could take out the intruder without much of a hassle. He would charge up the shot now, but the green light would be far too noticeable. He would have to charge in and take any intruder that might be in there by surprise.

"Johnson!"

He froze when he heard the familiar southern North American twang

from behind him. Reynolds! That rebel son-of-a-bitch. He glanced back, saw the rebel alone and with arms undrawn, and he stowed the plasma pistol in his coat for now.

"Now, you are a hard man to track down!" Reynolds said as he slowly came up behind him.

It wasn't the first time Reynolds came after him. The rebel showed up outside of Voi soon after he escaped the Ark. Reynolds' muscle, a big guy named Cobb, tried to wrestle Johnson to the ground, so he slashed Cobb with a combat knife. The infestation, for all its downsides, gave him incredible strength when he felt threatened. He'd then cut out his IFF transponder and discarded it.

"I'm no longer a man," he growled, then stopped abruptly when he realized what he said. "I mean, I'm still I didn't cut it off or nothin' I'm more or less intact!"

"You're a man, but you're a Flood man," Reynolds supplied.

He slowly exhaled. "You know about the Flood?"

"Do I? Johnson, haven't you been payin' attention to what's been goin' on?"

Startled, he turned his head just enough to get a glimpse of the rebel out of the corner of his eye. "What? Have the Flood attacked?"

"They did," Reynolds said in a way that implied that was in the past. "UNSC turned Earth into a nuclear hellhole trying to sterilize the Americas, Asia, Australia," he ticked the continents off on his fingers.

Jesus. His thoughts went to an island in the South Pacific. Though it was disrespectful to think it, he especially wished for its survival and hoped the nuclear devastation hadn't reached there.

Nirmala?

"They still couldn't kill 'em," Reynolds continued. "Then some rebels made a deal with the Gravemind. You know what a Gravemind is?"

"Yes," he grunted. All too well.

"Well, the Gravemind helped us and by 'us', I mean all folks on every side kill all the Flood except for the 'Mind itself,'" Reynolds said. "And the 'Mind, bein' a real mind, could be treated like a human brain, so some scientists turned it into a smart AI, and that's it; war's done."

"What?" He jerked around so that he faced the rebel, who flinched at the sight of his mutated body. "That's the worst idea in a long chain of bad fucking ideas!"

Reynolds shrugged. "Stopped the war, dinnit? May be a kludge likely to fail, but fer now it's solid. World's safe from the Flood. Least so long as there ain't another outbreak from some loose end the 'Mind couldn't control."

"So that's it? I'm a loose end you're gonna tie off?" He tensed his muscles, preparing to strike out with his whip-like tentacle arm.

Reynolds took a step back, raising his hands. "Well, hey, now, I don't mean anythin' by it. You're a good man, Johnson, and I do mean man. You're still human where it counts, and I ain't gonna be the first to make this hostile!"

As the rebel spoke, he heard light footfalls coming up behind him. He kept still, waiting for the intruder to come within striking distance.

"I'm just gonna keep talking so he can get behind you," Reynolds finished, giving a goofy grin.

Johnson spun around with cat-like agility and lashed out with his tentacle, striking the raised arm of a Spartan clad in MJOLNIR Mark V armor. Surprised, he hesitated, giving the Spartan time to punch him in the gut.

He flew back, knocked into Reynolds, and they both fell down to the ground, crunching through Yanme'e corpses.

"Damn it, Randy!" Reynolds cried, struggling to right himself. His clothes were streaked with yellow innards.

Figuring out that this Spartan "Randy" was with Reynolds, he grabbed the rebel with his tentacle arm, pinning his arms to his sides and holding him out in front of Johnson as a human shield. "Don'tcha come any closer, Randy, or I'll kill him."

Randy cocked his head. "Go ahead," the Spartan said in an unnervingly easygoing voice. "I don't know him that well."

"Oh, you are a piece of work, ain'tcha?" Reynolds muttered. He turned to Johnson, "You know, I always liked you! How's about showing an old friend a piece of mercy?"

"Sure thing, 'friend'." He gave the rebel a sharp headbutt, knocking him out. Johnson grabbed Reynolds' sidearm and tossed the soldier to the side. He then eyed the Spartan. "So, are you ONI's latest assassin? or am I to infer from your obsolete armor that you're a little late to the party?"

Though it was a common myth perpetuated by ONI that Spartans never died, soldiers who survived as many battles as Johnson were too wise to believe that propaganda or at least too jaded. Every Spartan listed as MIA was more than likely KIA in reality. A Spartan sent out against the rebels must have kicked it, and his or her armor was taken by the rebels. Johnson wondered if it was Randy himself who killed the Spartan or if he was just given the armor by his superiors.

"Obsolete? Really?" Randy ran a hand over his chest, producing a golden shimmer of light. "I prefer Old Faithful. Now, Johnson, we could do this the easy way! or the fun way. I'm supposed to give you a chance to surrender, but I'd really like to have a chance to kick your mutant ass, so I'm hoping you'll say no."

Definitely not a real Spartan. "Well, I hate to disappoint, soâ€|" He snapped the M6C and fired three rounds into the Spartan's chest.

The MJOLNIR shield shimmered and sparked as Randy charged him head-on.

Johnson leaped to the side, but Randy turned and met him there.

"You're too slow," Randy mocked. "Too weak."

Randy punched Johnson, who again flew back several feet. "Urg!"

"I'm disappointed," Randy said, closing in on him. "I expected more of a challenge from the Flood man."

Hey, that could be my superhero nameâ€|_ Johnson drew the plasma pistol and held the trigger down to build a charge. He'd seen these things knock out full Sangheili shields, leaving the aliens vulnerable to attack. He'd bet MJOLNIR shields worked the same way. After all, the Spartans weren't really immortal.

Recognizing the danger, Randy stopped. He then darted back down the corridor from where he came, weaving around to prevent Johnson from getting a lock.

Johnson tried to track him, but he reconsidered and released the trigger. With a hiss, the glowing charge flew down the hallway on a straight path, Randy easily dodging. Johnson snaked out his tentacle to grab Reynolds by the ankle and threw him up the hole in the ceiling before leaping up there himself. He made it up to the roof and glanced down to see Randy directly beneath himâ€|

Then the plasma charge made it into the armory.

BLAM!

Randy flew sideways down the hall as the windows shattered and the roof caved in. Johnson hugged Reynolds close to his body and ran across the rapidly disappearing floor, leaping over the gap for the adjacent rooftop.

4. Preaching

Rabar looked with dismay at the graffiti that decorated the walls of the common room of the second sector of the Unggoy district. He could put up with the religious messages declaring the continued life of Jitji, but the Sixth Column signâ€|"freshly painted with tomato sauce, no doubt representing Human bloodâ€|"was too much for him to handle.

He jumped up onto the nearest table and waved to get attention before calling out, "Fellow Unggoy, please, heed my words! The Humans must not be disrespected in this manner!" He pointed, aghast, at the Sixth Column sign. "I know most of you are unhappy with the UEGâ€|"I am as wellâ€|"but they are our hosts! We must not be so ungracious!"

"Who are you to speak?" asked a fellow covered in the colorful body

paint of a dancer. Rabar thought the way its yellows framed the dancer's eyes made him look uncomfortably like a Kig-yar. "You act like a preacher, but you sound like a monkey."

Monkeyâ€| That was a slur that came about when Unggoy first started living among Humans. It referred to an Unggoy who assumed a submissive role in relation to Humans akin to the pages of Sangheili when Unggoy were under the rule of the Covenant. It referenced the diminutive Earth animal that bore a resemblance to Humans. The kind of Unggoy called monkeys were not true Unggoy, but instead wanted to be Humans themselves.

He ground his teeth. "I am no monkey! I am simply a warrior who knows better than to treat allies so disgracefully. It is an insult to Jitji and his council to treat the alliance they forged so lightly!"

Another fellow spoke up, "Jitji forged that alliance to free us from Sangheili rule. Now that we are out of their grasp, we haven't a need for the UEG."

"You want war?" he demanded. "More bloodshed, more suffering? I cannot imagine that would be what Jitji would want for us. In his broadcasts, he spoke of war to achieve freedom and to slay the Sangheili that would take it from us. Though we are mistreated as a result of this capitalistic society, we are not prisoners bound to Milk as under Sangheili and false prophet rule."

"Very well said!"

He turned to see a Jitjist clericâ€"wearing a dark green robe referencing the oh-so poor and helpless victimized Floodâ€"giving him a deep bow. "Thank you," he said, nodding his head in respect.

The cleric leaped up to the table and joined him. "Indeed," he called out to the crowd, "our prophet Jitji saw the Humans as our friends and allies. It was not this Sixth Column which assisted our revolution, but the bold United Nations Space Command, and it is to them we are indebted. Whoever drew this symbol not only dishonors them; he dishonors Jitji himself!"

Now that this Unggoy of the cloth joined him, the people stood at attention. "That's right!" they agreed.

"Now let us restore honor to Jitji's name by together cleaning the wall of that horrid symbol," the cleric proclaimed. "But first, I wish to speak to you." He nodded at Rabar.

"Of course," he said, hopping off the table. He stepped off to the side, and the cleric joined him.

"I should formally introduce myself," the cleric said. "I am Master Dede, of the Jitjist Council. We of the Council have been searching for passionate, well-spoken Unggoy to spread word of the prophet's wisdom. What is your name, fellow?"

"Rabar," he said, not liking the direction this headed.

"Rabar," Master Dede said, "I would like you to join us and train to become a true preacher. Would you find that a worthy service?"

"Very worthy," he said. "However, I must decline, Master Dedet. I have a promising career as a farmer, and I have no patience for long sermons, I am afraid."

"Well, if you change your mind, I can be found in Sector Four," Master Dedet said, bowing his head. "Now, let us clean up that wall."

He nodded and went for cleaning supplies. He was grateful it was that easy to decline. As much as he appreciated some spirituality in his life, the Jitjists were proud of their devotion to the point of pretension, and he had no desire to spend most of his time among them. Moreover, he worried about what future Unggoy society had for it if religious authority was to be as present as in the false prophet regime.

He sighed. Unggoy social issues were so complicated. No wonder the Sangheili so failed to govern their free spirit; they never had to deal with anything like that in their homogenous society.

7-7-7-7

A lone Sangheili stood on a precipice. It was a cold night on the Sangheili homeworld of Sanghelios, and the moon Suban was visible hanging over his head. "My life has been wasted," he cried, groaning with sorrow. "I trained to be a warrior as was expected of me. My entire culture is based around fighting. I believed the false prophets when they said the Humans were evil, but now I know they are good. Those who called themselves prophets were lying all the time. Now I realize that I did evil when I thought I did good. I am sinful, and now I will throw myself from this cliff. Goodbye, cruel world.

"_Wait, brother!" came a voice. "Do not throw away God's gift!"_

He turned around to see another Sangheili coming up behind him. This one wore a necklace that bore a strange symbol, a pair of metal bars joined together perpendicularly with a vertical bar meeting at the center of the horizontal bar. The horizontal bar did not bisect the vertical one, however; it sat higher than the center. This symbol dominated the newcomer's appearance. "Who are you?"

"_Just one of God's servants," the newcomer replied. "He sent me to make sure you did not commit the crime of suicide."_

"_I no longer believe in the gods, my friend," he said. "Those were just the lies of the false prophets. Believing in them made me sinful because it made me kill the Humans, who were innocent victims. I am evil, and I will now die for my sins."_

"_Do not misunderstand," the newcomer said. "I do not mean the false gods but the true God, creator of the universe and master of us all. You do not need to die for your sins because God already sent his son Jesus Christ to die on the cross at the hands of his children. He sacrificed his only son so that we may find salvation. If you, as I have done, accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior, you will experience true spiritual fulfillment."_

"_God gave up his only son to die for our sins?" he gasped. "What a good leader to care so much for his people!"_

"_God is merciful and just," the newcomer agreed. "He asks only that you believe in him and recognize that Jesus Christ shed his holy blood to free you from sin. Recognize that he is the Lord, your God, and you will be saved. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. He will forgive your transgressions and remember them no more."_

"_That is all he asks?" he repeated. "Well, of course I will! But what shall I do with my life? I spent my whole life training to be a warrior."_

"_You still can be, my brother," the newcomer said. "You can be a warrior for God. There is an enemy out there greater than you can imagine: the beast Satan. God himself is a warrior who fights against Satan, the spirit of evil, and you can too. Satan's influence is all around us, trying to drown our brothers in sin, to take them away from the mercies of God, and we must wear the armor of God and fight him."_

"_Satan? Such evil exists? Why, Iâ€¦" _

"I have seen enough," the Arbiter said, waving a hand through the hologram to halt its playback. He had been called to the office of the Sanghelios Minister of Information for comment on the video he just watched. The Human organization Nonhumanitarians United was offering aid to the Sangheili people, espousing a desire to help those who were impoverished as a result of the Covenant's flawed management, but they also wanted to broadcast their religious tract.

"Your thoughts, Arbiter?" Minister 'Konguree asked, clicking his mandibles together.

"It is dangerous," he said, musing. "The Humans seek to impose their religion upon usâ€¦"

"As we would have to them," 'Konguree said.

"No, the Covenant would," he corrected. "We are free Sangheili. What we would have done under the rule of the Covenant is irrelevant."

"And it is true that our spirituality has been irreparably damaged by the fall of the Covenant," 'Konguree continued. "This tract, though I find it somewhatâ€¦ lacking in verisimilitudeâ€¦ It seeks to address that problem. While the mythology is strange, and I see no reason to believe that it reflects reality, I must admit that it makes me want to believe."

"Indeed," the Arbiter said flatly. He felt annoyed. After all the work he did to rescue his people from the lies of the Prophets, here was a fellow warrior ready to jump into submission to a false single god. "This tract could promote discontent among our people. This would anger the more radical reactionary segments of our population. They would attempt grievous harm upon these Human missionaries. That would harm the treaty."

"So you believe it should not be broadcasted?"

"Yes, I do."

7-7-7-7

Johnson landed nimbly upon the rooftop, his Flood-altered legs easily absorbing the shock.

Reynolds shuddered in his arms as he awoke. "Is it Christmas?" he cried.

Johnson dropped the rebel to the cracked concrete floor.
"Hardly."

Reynolds scrambled to his feet. "_Ta me de_," he swore as he took in the sight of the collapsing building. "The Spartan?"

He waved at the building. "Somewhere in there."

Reynolds eyed the building. He cupped his hands over his mouth and bellowed, "Yoohoo! Randy, you alive?"

There was no response but the echoes of the thunderous crash.

"Maybe now you'll think twice before coming after me," he suggested, cracking his knuckles against the side of his face. "But, no, I suspect you won't."

Reynolds shrugged. "You blew up a Columners' outpost. Not many of those around, are there? You got lucky this time. Next time, they might gun you down from a Pelican. I practically had to bully Randy into trying to take you alive."

"Very nice of you," he said sarcastically.

"Well, that's how it is," Reynolds said. "This Flood thing needs to be taken care of. You're not the first this happened to, you know. There was another case on Halo. Man had control for a bit, but the monster in him became dominant. How long before your monster takes the wheel, Johnson?"

"I'm in complete control," he said, willing his voice to carry the conviction he lacked. The infestation stirred in back of his mind, as if it heard its name. It began to whisper silently in his ear, urging violent action.

"Sure," Reynolds said. "_Now_, y'are. What about in a month from now? A year? Ten? You're honestly sayin' you'll never lose control? That the urge to kill will never dominate your thoughts? You'll never start thinkin', 'Hey, I turned off the Ark, the universe _owes_ me a killin' or two'?"

"No," he said, though he knew the rebel was right. The infestation made him want to kill Reynolds right now. He could so easily wrap his tentacle around the rebel's neck and snap it. He could suppress the monster for now, but Reynolds had a point. Somedayâ€| it might overcome him.

"And then there's the matter of the Flood," Reynolds continued as if

he hadn't heard him. "One day you might start makin' spores, and then we'd have another crisis on our hands. I don't think the 'Mind can control them where it is, all digified. If it were me that were Floodified, I like to think I'd be decent enough to hop in a volcano or some such to prevent another outbreak. You just gonna stick your head in the ground and pretend you're not whatcha are? And here I thought Sergeant Major Avery Johnson was a loyal soldier sworn to defend Earth and all her colonies."

"So, what?" he asked. "You want me to come quietly so your scientists can poke at me like a lab rat?"

"Meh, I figure it's some such like that," he said with a shrug. "Never did ask, myself. Best case scenario, though, innit? You surrender to ONI, they'll just kill you. Probably make it hell too."

"And your scientists won't?" he asked skeptically.

"Trust me, if there's one thing Rainbows don't want, it's to be like ONI," Reynolds said, referencing the Rainbow Tribe of rebels. Rainbows were hippies with guns. They would kill you in the name of peace and harmony, and then sing Kumbaya afterward.

"Rainbows, huh?" He chuckled. He couldn't see the rebel wearing their seven colors seriously. "That your faction, Reynolds?"

"Hell no," the rebel said. "Objectivist, born and raised. Just working with the Rainbows 'cause they've got all the nice toys: ships, AIs, Morlock 'fore you crushed himâ€|"

They together looked over at the pile of rubble. There was no sign of the faux Spartan, whatever his name was.

"The Rainbows are getting things done," Reynolds concluded. "Looks like we're gonna secede after all. The Lazarusâ€“that's the Gravemindâ€“Project really won them over at the UEG."

"It's a bad idea," he said. He meant the Gravemind, but it extended to the Insurrection. The UEG didn't negotiate with terrorists and it was a bad time to start.

"Maybe," Reynolds said. "On the other hand, maybe it's the start of something great. Galactic Peace, perhaps?"

"Sometimes war is justified," he said. Truth was, he agreed with some of the rebel rhetoric. Seceding from the UEG was best for a lot of the colonies.

It didn't justify terrorism, though. These rebels would detonate nukes in cities full of civilians just to make a point. Their war was not only to achieve independence but to justify the murder of innocents. For that reason, the rebels could not be allowed to have their goals met. Justice had to be done, and that meant locking them away like with any other criminals.

"Ain't that the truth," Reynolds agreed with a sigh, likely thinking the exact opposite.

A loud clatter came from the pile. Debris was thrown left and right

as Randy crawled out of the mess. He was hurt, as evidenced by a limp in his left leg, but he still seemed as formidable as ever. He immediately began to prowl around, searching for Johnson.

"So, like I was saying," Reynolds continued quietly, "if you come with us, I guarantee decent treatment, my word as a soldier."

"But you'll force me if I don't agree," he said. "Not much of a choice, then, is it?"

"I'll do whatever it takes to stop an outbreak," Reynolds stated. "But we fought together long and hard at Mombasa, and it's impossible to not see ya as a good ally, and I will take care o' you, promise."

He took a deep breath. Let it out. He didn't want to serve the rebels at all, but he knew the extent of ONI's mercy. Rainbow mercyâ€| had a definite potential to be gentler.

The infestation buzzed in his mind. It told him to kill Reynolds and run. He listened to it before when it told him to run. He ran from the Monitor; he ran from Reynolds; he ran from ONI; and he ran from the infestation itself. It was impossible to outrun, of course, being inside him, but the change in scenery tended to quiet it for a time as it adapted to the stimuli. It was a pressure on his thoughts, whispering without language what he would represent with the simple word _kill_.

Reynolds sucked in a breath.

Randy had caught sight of them. His golden visor reflected the gleam of the setting sun as he stared upward at their rooftop. The faux Spartan then jogged toward them with the speed of an Olympic athlete.

"So, whatcha thinkin', Johnson?" Reynolds asked as Randy neared.

The infestation was skeptical of his ability to kill Randy. It recognized the threat posed and urged him to run once more.

"I'm thinkingâ€|" He turned to face his sometimes-ally, and the infestation excitedly urged him to kill. He forced his gaze away, reducing the infestation's interference. He sighed. "I'm thinking I'm tired of running."

End
file.